

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review
Learning to Connect: Relationships, Race, and Teacher Education

Reviewed by Jay Gillen



LEARNING TO CONNECT: RELATIONSHIPS, RACE, AND TEACHER EDUCATION BY VICTORIA THEISEN-HOMER. (2020). ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS.

Can pre-service teachers be taught how to build strong relationships with students? What is a strong teacher-student relationship? What are strong relationships good for? How do teachers learn to build relationships with students across racial lines? Victoria Theisen-Homer—formerly an award-winning teacher in Los Angeles, and now a researcher at the Arizona State University—attempts answers to these questions through a superb comparative study of two teacher residencies that explicitly include relationship building in their coursework. She names one the “No Excuses Teacher Residency” and the other she calls the “Progressive Teacher Residency.” The charm of the book is in using the comparative study of two very different pedagogical orientations to try to elucidate aspects of the underlying problem: can relationship building be taught?

Theisen-Homer decides that each residency succeeds in helping new teachers think about relationships, practice them, and value them:

[T]eachers can be taught to form relationships with students...They can learn to honor parents and guardians, to reach out to them in multiple meaningful ways. They can learn to listen to students: what they say, what they imply, what they omit. They can learn to care for students, to push them academically, to try to empathize with their needs/interests/worries...They can learn to view students not as pupils who must acquire a predetermined set of skills, but as multifaceted human beings capable of teaching quite a bit to themselves, each other, and the teacher. (196)

Underlying Theisen-Homer’s research is the conviction that meaningful teacher-student relationships are “a crucial aspect of good teaching across racial and social differences” (xviii); however, the question of how pre-service teachers learn to build relationships with students and then sustain those relationships as they begin their careers is rarely addressed in the literature. Theisen-Homer hopes to begin filling in this gap, and she is testing the hypothesis that pre-service residencies where relational work is explicitly addressed may have pointers that other programs can follow. She finds that they do, in fact, have much to offer, partly just from the programs’ intentionality about relationship. But she also finds that teaching relationship building does not automatically result in effective teaching across racial and social differences.

The role of relationship building is very different in the two programs, and it turns out that the schools where the teachers are later assigned have an outsized effect on their ability to sustain the relationships they have been taught to value. On one hand, it seems that the relationship lessons of the “Progressive” teacher residency only work in schools where the students are mostly White and wealthy. On the other hand, the “No Excuses” relationship strategies only seem to work in schools where low-income students of color have already accepted that their role is to be compliant and

unquestioning in return for the promise of future access to dominant power structures.

If this outcome sounds bleak, it is because the book is honest. The author announces in the preface that her aim is to promote “I-Thou” relationships, following Martin Buber. This is a high standard. For Buber, “I-Thou” relationships contrast with “I-It” objectifications. “I-Thou” makes us human, and in fact the paradigmatic “I-Thou” relationship is our relationship to God. So Theisen-Homer holds up as a goal a quality of teacher work that goes well beyond what we normally think of as “schooling.” She is right to do this, and of course she is likely to be disappointed (in the short-term, at least) when she measures her goal against the practicalities of the racialized caste system in America today.

But this correct, idealistic intention lets Theisen-Homer read the teacher residencies with great accuracy; her most valuable contribution is the rich analysis in the portraits of the teacher residencies. The “No Excuses” residency is open and explicit about its teaching of relationship building as strictly instrumental. Teachers should use a set of “moves” on students to establish sufficient positive relationship-like interactions to cause the students to comply with teachers’ instructions 100% of the time. The fourth relationship “move,” for example, is that teachers should “chat for no reason” with students outside of class time, to build up a sense of ease and relaxation that can then be cashed in during the highly formalized—and in fact mostly boring and repetitive—class periods.

Clearly, this is not the author’s own style of relating, but she is not trying to score points. Instead, she is trying to show just how far the teaching of relationship can go in the “No Excuses” format. Students she interviews feel remarkably positive about the “No Excuses” teacher residents in the study, are willing to obey them, and accept that their subordinate roles now will pay off with money and power in the future. They also say clearly that their teachers don’t really know who they are. Theisen-Homer points out that this dynamic makes it impossible for the “No Excuses” preparation to address racial injustice, no matter how hard the program leaders might say they want to. Assimilationist means are only suited to assimilationist ends. “I-Thou” relationships, in contrast, would have to involve the possibility that the teachers could change their orientation to the dominant society as *they are affected* by the students. But that’s a revolutionary idea, and “No Excuses” clearly isn’t going there.

The “Progressive” residency fares better in one respect, but worse in another. Students are thought of as whole human beings. Teachers make no demand that their students follow them, but rather learn to follow their students—designing curriculum around interests, modulating expectations in response to student reactions, and so on. Relationships are “reciprocal,” not only instrumental. Not unexpectedly, the “Progressive” residency takes place at a wealthy, century-old, overwhelmingly White private school that the residents almost uniformly describe as “cozy.” In stark contrast to the “No Excuses” curriculum, classroom management is taught only vaguely through a “Nurtured Heart Approach,” which emphasizes the primacy of relationship and the importance of directing “energy”

towards positive behavior rather than “fueling” the negative. Theisen-Homer uses the pseudonym “Xanadu” for the host school, and it is hard to avoid a sense that the entire description of the “Progressive” residency is partly satirical. No pleasure-dome like this could really exist in our harsh world.

In fact, the “Progressive” residents do encounter public schools with less well-off students of color in some of their student teaching placements and after the residency. Predictably, their preparation reads as inadequate to both the teachers and to Theisen-Homer. There are too many students to build the reciprocal relationships that were possible in Xanadu. The culture of the stressed public schools conflicts with the cozy, supportive culture of the residency, and so the new teachers feel at sea. Theisen-Homer points out that none of them remain in urban or even racially-mixed suburban schools after the first year.

We know from the Preface that Theisen-Homer sides with the Xanadu theory of reciprocal relationship, so her chapter analyzing the “Progressive” residency’s failure to deal adequately with race is especially important. There is coursework around race, reading lists, guest speakers. But the residency employs only one Black instructor (the director of the program) and one Latina instructor (who points out that she represents “stealth diversity” because she “comes across as white”). Both instructors are wary of pushing residents out of their comfort zones, and the question of how much “racial work” the residents will do is ultimately left up to the almost all White residents themselves. Theisen-Homer sees this strategy as ultimately a failure, the evidence being that the “Progressive” graduates uniformly retreat to a White bubble as they move ahead in their careers.

The expertly crafted *Learning to Connect* makes a valuable contribution to the field of teacher preparation. I would love to see a sequel that widens the lens in ways that Theisen-Homer gestures towards, but doesn’t have a chance to cover. For example, there is roughly a page near the end of the book on “Lessons for Schools,” but I would like to hear much more. The book gives examples of well-prepared teachers who are nevertheless relatively helpless to sustain relationships in schools where relationships are not prioritized. So Theisen-Homer makes some excellent suggestions: keep total teacher-student ratios low; schedule lots of informal time for teachers and students to interact; and stop rushing through curriculum (“urgency [is] the enemy of human connections,” and an “efficient” pedagogical approach “bleeds the joy out of classes”). But these excellent suggestions implicate an enormous, politically complex set of assumptions, all of them tied up with race, caste and economics. Theisen-Homer argues persuasively that the question of how to prepare teachers for positive relationships with students cannot be separated from questions about the nature of the schools they will be teaching in, so we need to have that conversation, too.

Second, we hear very little about relationships of students with each other. Theisen-Homer mentions several times that students do learn a lot from each other, and I imagine that as a teacher she is extremely well-attuned to student-student relationships. These are vastly understudied, however, and we are blind if we think that teacher-student relationships are the most important relationships in schools. For teachers to truly know their students, they must also know that their own relationships with students are part of an immensely complicated social ecology.

Finally, the “I-Thou” standard is far from innocent. It implies that radical change is needed not only in our schools but also in our entire political economy. In this sense, Theisen-Homer’s excellent book is “stealth radical,” and I would love to hear more openly about the fuller implications of serious challenges to neo-liberal, data-driven relationships. Theisen-Homer lays her cards on the table when she writes of the “No Excuses” residency that “a system predicated on uncritically advancing dominant culture, of simply teaching students to navigate it, can never truly achieve any form of social justice” (45). The dominant culture must be challenged and changed if relationship building is to matter in political terms at all. But no one in the book decides to take that work on explicitly and consistently. The Black director of the Xanadu residency comes closest, but even she “tries to avoid ‘push[ing] too hard’ with residents” (110). Ultimately, even the Xanadu residents “seem poised to primarily advance the...life outcomes of already privileged students” (111). If we truly prioritize relationships, can we continue to allow three separate school systems: one for the very wealthy, one for the segregated suburbs, and one for the poor, both rural and urban? Doesn’t the value of recognizing each person’s full humanity through “I-Thou” relationships conflict with the value of property and racialized caste? I am sure as outstanding a teacher and scholar as Theisen-Homer is has fascinating answers to these questions and that we’ll hear them in due course; in the meantime, *Learning to Connect* has more than enough excellent material to start us off.



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